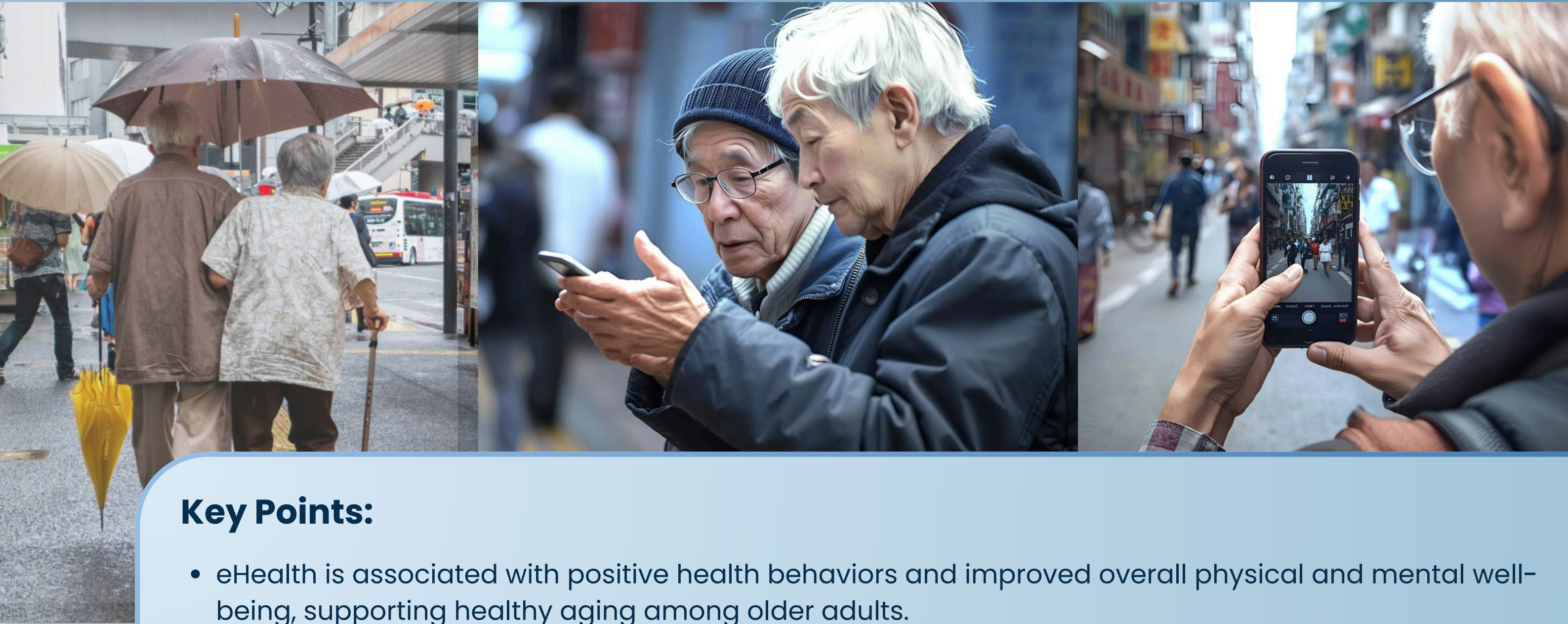


POLICY BRIEF

THE LEVEL OF EHEALTH LITERACY AND ITS IMPACTS ON HEALTH BEHAVIORS AND HEALTH OUTCOMES AMONG THE UNDERPRIVILEGED OLDER ADULTS IN HONG KONG



Key Points:

- eHealth is associated with positive health behaviors and improved overall physical and mental well-being, supporting healthy aging among older adults.
- The development of age-friendly interfaces for these eHealth tools, along with better training and support networks, is essential to assist older adults in adopting and benefiting from digital health technologies.

BACKGROUND

Older adults (≥ 65 years of age) accounted for 20% of the population in Hong Kong, and this estimate is projected to rise to 31% by 2039. In line with the global and Hong Kong primary health care reform and rapid development of digital technology, novel strategies like eHealth are needed to support healthy aging in older adults to alleviate the economic burden on public healthcare sectors. However, the level of eHealth literacy and its impacts on health behaviors and health outcomes among older adults was unclear, especially among the underprivileged. This policy brief summarizes the findings from cross-section analyses of 6,704 underprivileged older adults assessed by the *Generations Connect* project.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The cross-sectional study is nested under the *Generations Connect* project, which is an ongoing large-scale quasi-experimental community project. The project has trained over 1,000 university students to conduct home visits, assess health status, and deliver health behavioral interventions for 6,704 underprivileged older adults across the 18 districts in Hong Kong. The study aimed to assess their level of eHealth literacy and its impact on health behaviors and health-related outcomes.

KEY FINDINGS

Association of eHealth literacy and behaviors

This study showed that older adults with higher eHealth literacy were associated with positive health behaviors. This includes being less likely to smoke, engaging in more physical activities, and being more likely to be member of local community health centers (i.e., district health centres) in Hong Kong.



Correlation of eHealth literacy and health



Higher eHealth literacy is associated with better health status among older adults. With higher digital literacy, they were less likely to be diagnosed with non-communicable diseases, including hypertension and diabetes. They were also more likely to be associated with positive mental health outcomes.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Strengthen resources for digital literacy programs

Enhance resources for digital literacy training and education among older adults by implementing community-based programs tailored to their specific needs and competency levels, focusing on effective navigation of platforms and utilization of eHealth tools. Continuous support and training should be provided to ensure sustained proficiency in the use of eHealth technologies.

2. Provide affordable access to technology

Offer subsidies or grants to underprivileged older adults for purchasing necessary devices such as smartphones, tablets, or computers.

3. Implement age-friendly interfaces

Encourage the development of eHealth applications and websites that are designed with the needs of older adults in mind, including larger text, simple navigation, and voice-assisted technologies.

4. Build support networks

Initiate campaigns for encouraging family members and caregivers to assist older adults in using eHealth technologies. Also, organize community programs and foster initiatives that bring together older adults to share experiences and assist each other in using eHealth tools.

5. Organize training for healthcare professionals

Train community healthcare providers on effectively communicating and interacting with older adults using eHealth technologies.

CONCLUSION

Applying the results from this study, it is crucial to narrow the digital divide gap in older adults as improving eHealth literacy could be linked to health-promoting behaviors, primary care service utilization, and positive physical and mental health outcomes. Improving eHealth literacy should be a key factor to consider when devising health promotion and disease prevention strategies for older adults, especially in the context of global primary health care reform. Given the initial observational data, intervention studies (e.g., randomized controlled trials) should be conducted to provide additional insights regarding these relations.

Reference: Chau, S. L., He, W.J.A., Luk, T.T., & Chan, S.S.C. The level of eHealth literacy and its associations with health behaviors and health-related outcomes in Chinese older adults: A secondary analysis of a large-scale quasi-experimental study. (Unpublished).



Professor Sophia CHAN

Senior Advisor, President's Office, HKU;
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Professor Chan was appointed as undersecretary for Food and Health (2012-2017) and Secretary for Food and Health (2017-2022), notably leading Hong Kong's COVID-19 response and primary health care reforms including establishing District Health Centres, Hong Kong's first Chinese Medicine Hospital, and the Hong Kong Cancer Strategy 2019. Before her government roles, she was Head of the School of Nursing at HKU and Assistant Dean at HKU's Faculty of Medicine.

Professor Chan is internationally renowned in public health, tobacco control, and nursing research, with over 240 scientific publications and more than 3,800 citations. She is a top-funded researcher testing tobacco dependency interventions through RCTs. She pioneered the first smoking cessation counselling training for nurses and other health care professionals in Hong Kong. Recognized with numerous prestigious awards, including the Gold Bauhinia Star, Fellow of the American Academy of Nursing, and Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians (UK), she also holds advisory roles with WHO and international nursing leadership boards.



Professor Derek CHEUNG

Assistant Professor, School of Nursing, HKU

Professor Cheung focuses on brief interventions, nicotine therapy sampling, ecological momentary assessment, and nursing education. Over the past six years, he secured five external competitive grants totaling USD 1.04 million as principal investigator. Derek has published 103 peer-reviewed articles in prestigious journals, achieving an h-index of 23 with 2,134 citations.

His research significantly informs professional training, clinical guidelines, and international policies. His innovative teaching methods in smoking cessation training have resulted in recent publications and an award from the Hong Kong International Nursing Forum, contributing substantially to tobacco control initiatives.

Dr Matthew Siu Long CHAU

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Dr. Chau is a registered nurse and currently a Post-doctoral Fellow at the School of Public Health, The University of Hong Kong, where he earned his bachelor's and PhD degrees. His research focuses on addiction, eliminating tobacco use, and alcohol harm reduction - the world's two most preventable causes of disease and death.

His doctoral study was on using mobile instant messaging apps (e.g., WhatsApp, WeChat) to develop a chat-based intervention for alcohol reduction in university high-risk student drinkers. His research involves a wide spectrum of research methods, including population-based surveys, qualitative research, and randomised controlled trials. Dr. Matthew Chau is also committed to primary healthcare research.



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